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Markedness and Syllabus Design in SLA

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Abstract

This paper discusses how markedness issues have affected syllabus design in a second language acquisition context. To do this, first definitions of the term markedness are presented and different criteria for distinguishing marked from unmarked are reviewed. Then markedness issues in syllabus design are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The term “markedness” was first proposed by the Prague School of Linguistics in the theories of Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1939) and Roman Jakobson (1941 cited in Eckman, 1996). At first it was confined to phonetics, but since that time it has been widely applied to the research on phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, psychological linguistics, and applied linguistics (Jiang & Shao, 2006).

2. Markedness

The term “marked” has been defined in various ways to which we will turn in the next part, but one problem with work involving markedness is the vagueness of the concept (Ellis, 1994), a point Eckman (1985) admits when he says,"one area in which more research is needed is in defining ‘markedness’ relations" (p.306). The concept is characterized by a fuzziness that sometimes makes it difficult to determine which features are marked in relation to

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others. The reason for this is partly the differences in the linguistic descriptions and shifts in the linguistic theories upon which decisions about the degree of markedness of certain linguistic items rest (Ellis, 1994).

3. Markedness: definitions

The term markedness has been defined variously, but underlying all the definitions is the notion that some linguistic features are 'special' in relation to others which are more basic (Ellis, 1994). This means that they are, in some definable way, simpler, more basic and more natural than the other members which are in turn defined as the marked member (Eckman, 1996).

Crystal (1992) defines 'markedness' as follows:

> An analytic principle in linguistics, whereby pairs of linguistic features, seen as oppositions, are given values of positive (marked) or negative/neutral (unmarked). In its most general sense, this distinction relates simply to the presence or absence of a particular characteristic; for example, a plural noun in English might be said to be 'marked for number' (a plural ending having been added to the unmarked singular form). There are several other interpretations of markedness; for example, using a semantic criterion, the more specific of a pair of items would be called marked, as in the case of dog (unmarked) vs. bitch(marked), (p.245).

In linguistics, marked refers to the way words are changed or added to give a special meaning. The unmarked choice is just the normal meaning. For example, the present tense is unmarked for English verbs. That is, 'walk' to refer to present tense is unmarked, but 'walked' is marked. (Jiang & shao, 2006). And Spolsky (1989) cites Greenberg (1966) as saying" complexity in thought tends to be reflected in complexity of expression, with complexity of expression being stated in terms of markedness"(p.123).

It can be concluded form the above views on markedness that the concept of markedness is associated with complexity of structure, elaboration of meaning and difficulty of learning. As Battistella (1990) points out, there have been over the years a number of different approaches to, and definitions of, markedness , including the presence or absence of overt marking, occurrence in the environment in which neutralization occurs, amount of evidence required for acquisition by child-learners, and the frequency of occurrence across the world's languages

Of course, more technical definitions of "markedness" can be found in different linguistic traditions to which we will briefly turn now.

4. The Markedness Differential Hypothesis

The MDH was formulated as an attempt to address some of the problems with the CAH (Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis)**.** In short, the CAH holds that NL-TL differences are both necessary and sufficient to explain the difficulty that occurs in L2 learning. Under this view, all difficulty in L2 acquisition should occur only in areas of difference between the NL and TL, and thus Ll interference is paramount as an explanatory principle in L2 acquisition theory. By the early 197Os, support for the CAH had begun to erode, both conceptually and empirically. As a result, Eckman (1977) introduced the Markedness Differential Hypothesis (MDH). Markedness Differential Hypothesis states that the areas of difficulty that a language learner will have can be predicted on the basis of a systematic comparison of the grammars of the NL, the TL, and the markedness relations stated in universal grammar. The MDH makes crucial use of the concept markedness**,** a relational term that has been viewed in different ways by different approaches, but for the purposes of the MDH, markednessis defined as:

> A phenomenon A in some language is more marked than B if the presence of A in a language implies presence of B, but presence of B does not imply presence of A.

Characterized in this way, markedness refers to the relative frequency or generality of a given structure across the world's languages.

Using these markedness relationships, the MDH makes three claims:

a. Those areas of the TL that differ from the NL and are more marked than the NL will be difficult.
b. The relative degree of difficulty of the areas of the TL that are more marked than the NL will correspond to the relative degree of markedness.
c. Those areas of the TL that are different from the NL, but are not more marked than the NL will not be difficult.

As you see, the goal of the MDH is the same as that of the CAH: to explain difficulty in L2 acquisition. The MDH, however, is capable of accounting for some facts that the CAH cannot account for, namely, (1) why some NL-TL differences do not cause difficulty, and (2) why some differences are associated with degrees of difficulty and others are not.

One other definition of markedness is associated with Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar, where the rules of a language which are core are distinguished from those which are periphery. As Kean defines it: The core is the highly restricted set of grammatical principles and parameters specified in the theory of Universal Grammar (UG); the principles are invariant, absolute universals, and the parameters are those properties of grammar which are necessary but which have varying realizations in particular core grammars (e.g. basic word order). The periphery consists of language-particular phenomena outside the domain of the core; while all languages have a periphery, the properties of the periphery are not defining properties of the grammars of natural human languages (e.g. they may turn on properties of weak generation) (Kean 1986:80 cited in Hume, 2006).

This principle has important consequences for the theory of learning. As Chomsky (1981, p.9, cited by Hume, 2006) states:

> We would expect the order of acquisition of structures in language acquisition to reflect the structure of markedness in some respects, but there are complicating factors; e.g. processes of maturation may be such as to permit certain unmarked constructions to be manifested only relatively late in language acquisition, frequency effects may intervene, etc.

Another definition of markedness is found in language typology, where it is claimed that those features that are universal or present in most language are unmarked, while those that are specific to particular languages or found in only a few languages are marked (VanPatten, 1992). Zobel (1984) distinguishes 3 senses in which rules can be marked:

a. *Typological specialization*. For example whereas Persian adheres to the universal tendency of language to include resumptive pronouns, English avoids such structures. Thus permitting resumptive pronouns is unmarked and avoiding it is marked.
b. *Typological inconsistency*. For example German permits two different word orders, one in main clauses (SVO), and the other in subordinate clauses (SOV). Thus German word order can be regarded as marked when compared with English word order which has a high level of consistency.
c. *Typological indeterminacy*. This occurs when a structure predicted based on the overall typology of a language is not found. For example, English as a SVO language might be expected to manifest a noun + adjective ordering, but it does not do so.

5. How to distinguish marked from unmarked?

Hume (2008) suggests that there is a single property that underlies diagnosis. This property is EXPECTATION. She believes expectation is positively correlated with unmarkedness. Thus, in a language containing the set of sounds {x, y, z} where any of the three sounds can occur in a particular context (c), if there is a higher expectation that x as opposed to y and z will occur in C, x is considered less marked then y and z (Hume, 2008).

In an attempt to practically distinguish between unmarked and marked structures, Haspelmath (2006) introduces 12 different senses in which the terms “marked” and ”unmarked” have been used by linguists. He puts these under four general classes: markedness as complexity, as difficulty, as abnormality and as a multidimentional correlation.

6. Markedness and syllabus design

The only account of markedness concerns in syllabus design relates to the synthetic syllabi. In synthetic syllabi, whether structural, lexical, or functional-notional, grading of syllabus units is quite an intuitive activity which depends on various notions of ‘difficulty’, ‘usefulness’ or ‘frequency’. Therefore, structural syllabi have traditionally used sequencing criteria such as ‘difficulty’, ‘usefulness’, or ‘general agreement’ to decide on the order in which linguistic material should be presented to learners. In most cases, if not all, the various concepts of difficulty or usefulness have been left unexplained.

Ellis (1993) acknowledges that the issue of how to sequence units of grammatical instruction is problematic, and suggests using traditional criteria, such as the intuitively judged relative difficulty, and the relative frequency of grammar items. In addition he suggests marked features should receive explicit instruction, since 'unmarked features may be learned by most learners naturally, and therefore do not require explicit attention' (1993, p.106). But Robinson (1995) believes Ellis's claim deserves two questions:

1. Which definition of markedness is to be adopted?
2. Is it true that unmarked features are learned naturally, without being explicitly attended? Because if Ellis means learners can learn them without paying focal attention to them in the input Schmidt would answer no to the last question, since he argues all learning requires focal attention accompanied by awareness of the form of input (Robinson, 1995b; Schmidt, 1990, 1995).

As Robinson (1998) points out, the definition of markedness and the implicit idea that unmarked features do not need focused attention remains a problem. Of course it must be added that substantial body of second language acquisition research has revealed that learners who are taught marked relative clauses (RCs) can acquire the less marked ones without instruction on them. On the basis of this research, Hamilton (1994 cited in Robinson, 1995) proposed the Implicational Generalization Hypothesis (IGH), i.e., that knowledge of more marked forms implies the knowledge of less marked ones.

So far as teaching is concerned, we have several major generalisations that may apply to the syllabus and to the sequencing of grammar. No stage in acquisition or teaching should violate these universals; grammatical syllabuses have to be checked, not just in terms of the final target, but also in terms of whether each stage predicated for the student fits the range of possibilities for human languages. Students may profit by being given the chance to apply 'consistency' to the language they hear, say by generalising over several phrase types at once; points where the language is inconsistent will provide particular learning problems, for example the vacillation in English between Genitive Noun "John's book" and Noun Genitive "the parting of the ways"; difference between languages can now be expressed in the syllabus in terms of choices from implicational universals and hierarchies. Each aspect of syntax taught to the students will have to be evaluated against its possibilities for generalisation to other structures rather than simply in it own right (Cook, 1989).

7. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the present writer although markedness hypothesis has had great influences on the linguistic theories, it seems its applications to syllabus design have not been so widespread unless in the cases that markedness has been equated with difficulty in which case it has been employed as a criterion for sequencing the syllabus.

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